

DR. DEER'S VIEWS



BY THE WAY, THE FAMILY ALSO GETS TO HUNT

By Dr. James C. Kroll

I am blessed to have spent much of my career working over the entire range of the white-tailed deer. As a consequence, I have examined deer management both from landowner's and hunter's perspectives. There are times I feel my role is to serve as a "confessor" for these groups.

Weekly, my phone buzzes with some complaint by a landowner about a lessee or vice versa. So, I decided to devote this column to the common problems encountered when landowner and lessee meet.

The most common complaint today is: "We are being priced out of deer hunting." Just when a group of hunters really gets a property to the point of producing big bucks, the landowner calls up one day to inform them he has a better offer.

Years of hard work and self-control quickly go out the window. The only recourse is look for a new place where the same thing happens again and again. Yet, it does not have to be this way if both sides only consider the other's needs and aspirations.

Seldom does a landowner consider anything but a short-term lease. After all, lease prices may go up, the landowner's situation may change and then there is the ever-present human tendency not to make long-term agreements.

However, a long-term lease actually works to the landowner's and lessee's advantage. A landowner who looks constantly for new hunters willing to pay more and more may not be coming out on top in the long haul. Here's why.

My colleague Dr. Gary Kronrad and I conducted an economic analysis on values a hunting lease may add to a ranch or other property. We looked at the true value of activities, such as hunting camp

development, electrification, water well drilling, road construction and maintenance, security, as well as actual improvements to the deer herd itself.

We discovered the lease amount being paid to the landowner pales in comparison to the per acre value lessees often add. We also discovered, though, willingness of hunters to provide improvements is a direct function of the level of security they feel towards the longevity of the relationship.

What happens in a case where there are no guarantees? Just about the time the herd is producing trophy bucks, some fellow with a handful of cash shows up to take it away! Is that a good deal or not?

Hunters, especially those who can afford a good South Texas lease, understand economics. As with any commodity, prices go up and the landowner obviously wants to make the most income. So, in a good lease relationship there needs to be acknowledgment from both sides the lease fee will increase inevitably over time. The trick is not to increase the fee beyond the financial limits of the hunters.

That's where value-added activities come into play. A good lease should include an agreement from the hunters concerning what activities they will invest in as lessees, either in direct payments or "sweat equity." Each of these should be



DR. JAMES C. KROLL PHOTO

agreed upon and the value of each clearly stated.

For example, what is the cost/benefit of feeding deer? When done correctly, feeding deer often costs thousands of dollars per year. Our research has shown a deer on the typical ranch will eat about two pounds of feed per day.

A 2,000-acre ranch with an "estimated" deer population density of one adult to 20 acres will have about 100 deer. That means the herd will consume around 200 pounds of feed per day or 36-1/2 tons per year. That amounts to about \$10,000 (\$5 per acre), not including feeders and labor.

Research has shown fawn recruitment can be doubled through feeding, so the value-added benefit of feeding can be substantial, and that's just one activity.

Adding in a water well (at least \$9,000), road construction and maintenance (\$1,000 per mile), etc. brings the value of these contributions to a very high level.

But, won't the new, higher-dollar lessees do the same things? Maybe, but my experience is the more someone pays for the lease, the more they expect out of it. The previous hunters commonly let young bucks walk, with the expectation they would be around in three or four years to benefit from this action.

I have been working with some hunters on one of the best-known trophy ranches in Mexico, the Cuevas Ranch. For many years, these guys have invested thousands to make Cuevas what it is today. They think nothing about letting a Boone and Crockett (B&C) buck walk so he can pass on his genes.

Fortunately, the family that owns the ranch long ago realized this type of commitment was worth real dollars over the long haul. They easily could lease the ranch for much more, but the new lessees would not have the same emotional and financial commitment to the herd. So, they would be less willing to make the sacrifice. What is a ranch with dozens of trophies worth compared to one with mediocre, immature bucks?

The prudent landowner obviously wants to maintain or increase the value of his property. To do so, more often than not he establishes shooting quotas, usually for the number of trophy bucks

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and "management" or cull bucks. This is often a big mistake on the part of the landowner. "You each can shoot one trophy buck and one management buck," the rancher will declare.

Now, let's translate that into action by his hunters. The average hunter will work all season trying to extract the biggest buck on the place. This "cherry picking" does not stop with the killing of a trophy buck.

The next step is to search out the largest

buck meeting the requirements as a management buck, which turns out to be a large-framed eight-pointer, leaving literally dozens of small-framed eight-pointers free to breed every doe that reaches estrus. That precisely is the wrong way to go about it.

A rancher once asked me, "How many management bucks will I have to take?" My answer was less than satisfactory: "Every one out there!" He then asked me how many that would be? Having done a detailed camera census of his ranch, I told him he needed kill about 70 percent of his bucks 3 years old and older. He had to sit down because it was more than he wanted to hear.

The fact is, over the last two decades I have seen ranch after ranch deteriorate in quality, all while the landowners and their hunters all thought they were "managing" the herd. If it truly is to be a partnership between the landowner and his hunters, a real management plan has to be developed, aimed at long-term increases in antler quality. At Cuevas, the hunters

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2. A gun in the hand is better than a cop on the phone.
3. Glock: The original point and click interface.
4. Gun control is not about guns; it's about control.
5. If guns are outlawed, can we use swords?
6. If guns cause crime, then pencils cause misspelled words.
7. Free men do not ask permission to bear arms.
8. If you don't know your rights you don't have any.
9. Those who trade liberty for security have neither.
10. The United States Constitution © 1791, all rights reserved.
11. What part of "shall not be infringed" do you not understand?
12. The Second Amendment is in place in case they ignore the others.
13. 64,999,987 firearms owners killed no one yesterday.
14. Guns have only two enemies: rust and liberals.
15. Know guns, know peace and safety. No guns, no peace nor safety.
16. You don't shoot to kill; you shoot to stay alive.
17. 911 - government sponsored Dial-a-Prayer.
18. Assault is a behavior, not a device.
19. Criminals love gun control - it makes their jobs safer.
20. If guns cause crime, then matches cause arson.
21. Only a government afraid of its citizens tries to control them.
22. You only have the rights you are willing to fight for.
23. Enforce the "gun control laws" we have, don't make more.

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seldom kill a top end buck until he has passed his prime.

Research has shown most bucks make their ultimate genetic contribution between 4 and 5 years old. Those are the years bucks fight their way into the breeding pool. After their fifth year, their contribution declines, and it really does little harm in taking them at this age. Some biologists want folks to wait until a buck is 8 or 9 years old, but there is no sound science behind this strategy.

So, in a real trophy management program, one (and there are several others) important management strategy is to try to kill most of the bucks 3 years old or older, with small main frames and eight or less points. This also must be coupled with protection of the best bucks on the property for at least two years. In so doing, the bottom gradually approaches the top.

The next problem involves who can hunt the property. That is the source of this issue's title. Many times, landowners reserve hunting rights for their families, which turns out to be a disaster!

First of all, who exactly is "family?" Does this include grandchildren and cousins? Will they be allowed to take trophies or management deer? When will they be on the property? Some ranchers designate a specific portion of the property for family. Yet, every study ever done reveals even on extremely large properties (25,000-plus acres), most of the bucks in one part of the ranch ultimately end up on another. If you are going to lease your property, lease the entire ranch.

It does not end with family. In a good lease, it is established in writing exactly who gets to hunt. I have seen many a good lease destroyed because some guest hunter killed the best buck taken all year. Since it is a sound strategy to remove most, if not all, management bucks, this is often difficult for a small number of hunters.

Most ranches in South Texas limit hunter density to one per thousand acres. Although this has no real basis in fact, a

5,000-acre property would then have only five hunters. Again, I like the way some Mexican ranchers are now organizing their leases.

Because there is a sound relationship—and clear objectives for the management program—these ranchers permit the lessee to sell management buck hunts. But, money earned does not go into the pockets of the lessees. Rather, there is a just accounting of income; and, the money goes toward an annual, and mutually agreed on, project(s).

For example, one of the Mexican ranches entered into an agreement with their lessees to construct the equivalent of our Deer Management Pen here in Texas. Four 10-acre pens and helicopter time were paid from income. The hunters voted to forego shooting the four top bucks (some over 200 inches B&C) needed for "brood bucks" in the pens.

Twenty ranch does were then placed in each of the four pens, with the goal of improving genetics. This was all done because the rancher was willing to let them sell management bucks, and the hunters were willing to commit to not shooting the best bucks. It is a partnership that works.

Some landowners actually tell me they just cannot tell their hunters what bucks to shoot. This is particularly true for the timber companies. What does that have to do with anything? The King Ranch has one of the best reputations for quality deer hunting, yet do they let their hunters kill whatever they want? Let a pasture come up for lease on the King and folks line up.

What landowners have to learn is hunters are the tools they must use to increase the value of their property. It is every bit legitimate to set shooting goals and criteria. You cannot let your hunters degrade your herd. The key is giving hunters the security of knowing, by following the management guidelines that they will not lose their lease to a "cat."

Every landowner and lease should have a comprehensive management plan. There are several good reasons to do so. From the landowner's perspective, it serves as

legal document that substantiates that he is running a business. The Internal Revenue Service likes nothing better than to prove you are a "hobby" operation. It also is important as an estate planning/management tool.

My daughter recently asked me if I had a written management plan for our property? The reason she asked was she loves our place as much as my wife and me. Once I am gone, how will she know what to do? Next, a management plan, when reviewed and amended regularly, is the only way to stay on task to reach your collective management goals.

When I use the term management plan, I am not talking about some fill-in-the-blank document required or supplied by a state or federal agency. I am referring to a complete plan, including:

- The objectives in clearly stated language.
- The resources at hand or needed to reach these goals.
- The plan of attack.
- The methods to be used to evaluate progress.
- The time period between review and amendments.

Coming up with an objective seems simple, yet it is definitely not! I often ask landowners what is their objective? "I want to shoot trophy bucks" is the most common answer. That is not an objective, it is an expectation. A proper objective would be: "I want to take 12 bucks in the 150-inch B&C class annually."

Resources at hand, as well as the capabilities and limitations of the land, must be considered in any management plan.

One of the first things I do is inventory the equipment the landowner has to get the various jobs done. It does no good to prescribe planting food plots if the fellow does not even own a tractor! Further, the landowner may want a large lake for crappie fishing, but there is no place suitable or an adequate watershed to feed it.

The plan of attack is the most detailed portion of the document, basically covering the what, when and hows of management. There should be explanations concerning terms, and

nothing should be assumed about the landowner's knowledge. If it is recommended to feed your deer, how are you going to do it, what kind of feeders do you use and what should be the density and placement?

Sound record keeping should be an integral part, both for management plans and written leases. You cannot possibly manage a deer herd without adequate and accurate records. The plan should clearly designate what records are to be taken and how they are to be recorded. Later, you will be able to analyze the responses of your habitat, deer and hunters to the plan and then make adjustments to the plan as needed.

In general, the time period covered by a plan or lease should be 5-7 years, the amount of time it takes most habitats and herds to respond to management.

A management plan is a dynamic document. It only starts you on the way to your goals. You must be able to review your records, analyze the response and then make adjustments.

I am firmly convinced private landowners are, and will remain, the key to hunting opportunities. A sound landowner-lessee relationship will guarantee access to quality animals and quality hunting experiences. This includes long-term commitments, a management plan with sound, attainable objectives, trust and communication.

Hunting is not ever going to be free, and hunting is not a welfare commodity we all deserve. To produce game in these times, we all have to recognize our sport, like any other, has its costs for participation. ♪

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